

"Girls, we've come to Chek Jawa, where the winds and current are strong, so keep a straight course and avoid the shallow areas so you don't get grounded!" Our instructor, Shee Mun, bellowed into a megaphone. I swallowed apprehensively, dread bubbling uncomfortably in the pit of my stomach, knowing that this would be one of the most challenging obstacles in our expedition.

"Easier said than done," muttered my kayaking partner, Janice, echoing my thoughts. I gave a non-committal grunt, and in unison we dipped our paddles into the murky turquoise depths of the sea, and started paddling. As I had predicted, it was the most arduous part of our expedition thus far – "challenging" was a staggering understatement. The wind whistled deafeningly past our ears, buffeting us and causing the already restless waves to become even choppy. Our little kayak, which had previously seemed so strong and sturdy when we set off for the expedition, now seemed flimsy and insignificant in the vast expanse of the sea.

Without realizing it, we had fallen behind. Other kayaks glided forward in an evidently effortless attempt, while Janice and I were conspicuously lagging behind. Whenever we attempted to paddle straight ahead, the winds and waves would interfere, and we would veer left out to open sea, away from the fleet of kayaks. No matter how forcefully we tried to turn right, our kayak would relentlessly continue out to open sea. The only solution was to continue turning left until we were headed in the right direction, which was frustratingly tedious.

"This is so frustrating!" cried Janice exasperatedly as we deviated from the fleet for what seemed like the millionth time in a row. Buffeted by the treacherous wind and waves, the expedition seemed hopeless, Chek Jawa seemed never-ending, and my arms were throbbing and aching painfully from the constant paddling. Each push of the paddle through the water felt like trying to paddle through glue, viscous and effort draining. I was so fatigued that I felt like tumbling overboard into the cool, welcoming sea and drowning myself. I had obtained several stinging blisters from the metal surface of the paddle, which perennially chafed against my palms, and bruises had bloomed where my knuckles kept knocking against the side of the kayak.

"Girls, you okay?" yelled Shee Mun.

"No," I growled, mentally hurling vulgar profanities at whoever had invented kayaks.

"Your stern rudder is wrong," she told us, demonstrating the correct way to perform the stern rudder and effectively alter the direction of the kayak.

It finally dawned on us why we had fallen so far behind. Reddening slightly, we paddled forward with renewed force, energy surging forth into our limbs, and our kayak slowly and steadily bested the rough winds and turbulent waves of Chek Jawa to merge with the fleet once more. Giddy euphoria engulfed me as we left Chek Jawa further and further behind, revelling in the sense of accomplishment that came from finally overcoming what had once seemed so impossibly challenging.

(500 words)

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